

Building the Vision



The Building Blocks of Assessment Success

To achieve excellence in assessment at the local level district, school, and classroom leaders will need to team up to develop an integrated system that uses the assessment process and its results, both to verify student success and to support student learning. To do so requires (1) balancing assessment uses to serve a variety of purposes, (2) accurate assessments that yield dependable results and (3) developing a classroom assessment environment that involves students as partners in monitoring and managing their own success while they are learning.

A *balanced assessment system* satisfies the information needs of all assessment users at the classroom, building, and district levels. *Accurate assessments* provide these users with the evidence of achievement they need to do their jobs. We know that, to maximize learning, *students* must top the list of assessment users—assessment results must be shared with students and teachers, so they can participate in making key data-based instructional decisions. In Part 2 we explore each of these components to assist your leadership team in formulating its own vision of excellence in assessment. Once your team has created that local vision, you can evaluate where you are now in relation to where you want to be, and can plan your own strategies for closing the gap. Parts 3–5 of this guide will assist you with your self-study and action planning.

Vision Part 1: Balanced Assessment Systems

Assessment is, in part, the process of gathering evidence of student learning to inform instructional decisions. Local district assessment systems promote student success when they help to inform decisions that both support and verify learning; that is, when the system is designed to serve both *formative* and *summative* purposes across all relevant levels of assessment use.

These levels of use are (1) day-to-day *classroom* assessment, (2) periodic *interim/benchmark* assessment, and (3) *annual* standardized testing. Table 2-1 crosses these three use levels with formative and summative applications to outline the integrated mission of a balanced system in terms of the full array of purposes it must serve. These purposes derive from the answers within each level to the following questions:

- What are the *key decisions* to be informed by assessment results?

- Who are the *decision makers*?
- What *information* do they need to make sound decisions?
- What essential *assessment conditions* must be satisfied to ensure they get that information?

In a balanced assessment system, the needed evidence flows into the hands of the intended decision maker(s) in a timely and understandable form. Please review Table 2-1 before continuing.

Table 2-1 **Framework for a Balanced Assessment System**

Level of Assessment/Key Issues	Formative Applications	Summative Applications
<i>Classroom Assessment</i>		
Key decision(s) to be informed?	What comes next in each student's learning?	What standards has each student mastered? What grade does each student receive?
Who is the decision maker?	Students and teachers	Teacher
What information do they need?	Evidence of where the student is now on learning continuum	Evidence of each student's mastery of each relevant standard
What are the essential assessment conditions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate standards in learning progressions • Accurate assessment results • Results leading to next steps • Results as descriptive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and appropriate standards • Accurate evidence • Evidence well summarized • Grading symbols that carry clear and consistent meaning for all

Table 2-1 Framework for a Balanced Assessment System (continued)

Level of Assessment/Key Issues	Formative Applications	Summative Applications
<i>Interim/Benchmark Assessment</i>		
Key decision(s) to be informed?	Where can we improve instructional programs right away? Where are students struggling?	Did the program of instruction deliver as promised? Should we continue to use it?
Who is the decision maker?	Professional learning communities; district and building instructional leaders	Instructional leaders
What information do they need?	Standards students are struggling to master	Accurate evidence of student mastery of particular program standards
What are the essential assessment conditions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear and appropriate standards • Accurate assessment results • Results revealing how <i>each</i> student did in mastering <i>each</i> standard 	Accurate assessments focused on specific program standards aggregated over learners
<i>Annual Accountability Testing</i>		
Key decision(s) to be informed?	Where and how can we improve instruction next year?	Are enough students meeting standards?
Who is the decision maker?	School leaders, curriculum & instructional leaders	School and community leaders
What information do they need?	Standards students are struggling to master	Percent of students meeting <i>each</i> standard
What are the essential assessment conditions?	Accurate evidence of how <i>each</i> student did in mastering <i>each</i> standard aggregated over students	Accurate evidence of how <i>each</i> student did in mastering <i>each</i> standard aggregated over students

Classroom Assessment

Two aspects of the *classroom* assessment level are worthy of note. The first is that, historically, it has been almost completely ignored as a school improvement tool. Over the decades, we as a nation have made immense investment in local, state, national, and international standardized testing, followed more recently by increased levels of standardized interim/benchmark testing. During this same period, we have invested almost nothing to ensure the quality or effective use of the other 99.9 percent of the assessments that happen in students' lives—those conducted day to day with their teachers in their classroom. Yet classroom assessment has proven its worth in enhancing achievement (Black & Wiliam, 1998). For this reason, *no assessment system can really be in balance unless the classroom level of assessment is fulfilling its role in supporting and verifying learning.*

Second, while classroom-level instructional decisions differ between formative and summative uses, the essential assessment conditions remain constant. Achievement standards must be spelled out from the beginning of instruction in the form of deconstructed, clear, and appropriate learning targets. Further, these learning targets must be turned into quality assessments that yield dependable information with sufficient precision to reflect how well each student mastered each of the standards. Only then can teachers and students know which standards have yet to be mastered (formative purposes), or the extent to which each student succeeded in meeting requirements (summative purposes).

As we have worked to promote effective classroom assessment, we have adopted labels introduced by an international community of educational researchers and practitioners. We refer to assessments that support and promote learning as “assessment *for* learning” and applications that verify or certify achievement as “assessment *of* learning.” Both are important, but they are different, and effective local assessment systems balance the two. Table 2-2 compares them in terms of purposes, users, and other aspects. Thought of in a broad sense, assessment *for* learning is formative assessment that actively involves students in every aspect of their own assessment.

Table 2-2 Comparing Assessment *for* and *of* Learning: Overview of Key Differences

	Assessment <i>for</i> Learning	Assessment <i>of</i> Learning
Reasons for Assessing	Promote increases in achievement to help students meet more standards; support ongoing student growth; improvement	Document individual or group achievement or mastery of standards; measure achievement status at a point in time for purposes of reporting; accountability
Audience	Students about themselves	Others about students
Focus of Assessment	Specific achievement targets selected by teachers that enable students to build toward standards	Achievement standards for which schools, teachers, and students are held accountable
Place in Time	Process during learning	Event after learning
Primary Users	Students, teachers, parents	Policy makers, program planners, supervisors, teachers, students, parents
Typical Uses	Provide students with insight to improve achievement; help teachers diagnose and respond to student needs; help parents see progress over time; help parents support learning	Certify competence or sort students according to achievement for public relations, gatekeeper decisions, grading, graduation, or advancement
Teacher's Role	Transform standards into classroom targets; inform students of targets; build assessments; adjust instruction based on results; involve students in assessment	Administer the test carefully to ensure accuracy and comparability of results; use results to help students meet standards; interpret results for parents; teachers also build assessments for report card grading
Student's Role	Self-assess and contribute to setting goals; act on classroom assessment results to be able to do better next time	Study to meet standards; take the test; strive for the highest possible score; avoid failure
Primary Motivator	Belief that success in learning is achievable	Threat of punishment, promise of rewards
Examples	Using rubrics with students; student self-assessment; descriptive feedback to students	Achievement tests; final exams; placement tests, short-cycle assessments

Source: Adapted from *Understanding School Assessment* (pp. 17 & 18), by J. Chappuis and S. Chappuis, 2002, Portland, OR: Assessment Training Institute. Copyright 2006, 2002 by Educational Testing Service. Adapted by permission.

Interim/Benchmark Assessment

At the *interim/benchmark* level of assessment, formative use requires advance planning. In this case, assessments can be used periodically during the term to keep track of student progress in mastering each standard. Note that if these are to be used in formative ways (that is, to promote further learning), accountability or grading decisions should not come into play. The primary purpose should be to identify standards students are struggling to master and the students struggling to meet those standards. This allows teachers to use the results in two ways. First, it provides them the information needed to zero in on how to improve their own instruction aimed at those standards. Second, these results can help teachers and students focus on identifying student strengths and areas needing improvement so they can plan interventions together that overcome problems students may be experiencing individually or collectively.

On the summative side at this level the purpose is often to determine the viability of a particular educational program, however that is defined in your local context: should you continue or discontinue the instructional methodology, current text adoption, curricular sequence, and so on. To inform such judgments, the assessment must reflect the intended learning outcomes of that program.

Common Assessments

Many schools and districts around the country are forming professional learning communities (PLCs) (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). In PLCs, faculty who have the same teaching assignments collaborate to identify common learning targets, develop (or purchase) common assessments linked to those targets, conduct those assessments, and process results together to learn, in part, how they can improve student learning. When these assessments are properly focused on the targets of instruction and are of high quality, the results also can serve to highlight subsets of students within and across classrooms who have specific instructional needs. When this happens common assessments can inform classroom assessment-level instructional decisions, too. To help with this or with program improvement, the assessment results must tell users *how well each student mastered each standard*. Teachers can then use this level of information to focus their efforts to overcome specific student weaknesses.

Annual Testing

When it comes to *annual testing*, tradition has centered on summative accountability decisions: Did enough students succeed at mastering the standards? Is each school

performing and producing successful students as it should be? But note once again in this context that for these questions to be answered, assessment results must provide a sufficiently high-resolution portrait of student learning to reveal how well each student mastered each standard. In other words, it is of little value to develop long lists of standards, assemble test items sampling broadly across that list, and set a total test score cutoff to determine if each student satisfied requirements defined as the total set of standards. At best, such an assessment will undersample the standards its items reflect; at worst, the assessment is likely to omit some standards. When this happens, inferences about individual student mastery of individual standards are indefensible.

Additionally, if the assessment is to tell you how well each student mastered each standard, then an important annual formative application becomes viable. As with the interim/benchmark level, you can aggregate results across students to identify which standards students struggled to master. You then can focus long-term program improvement efforts on those standards most in need of attention next year.

To summarize, a balanced assessment system relies on assessments from multiple levels that work together to inform decisions that both support and verify student learning. The questions for your leadership team to answer are, Are we in balance? Do we have in place an integrated set of assessments that can provide the information needed to help students succeed?

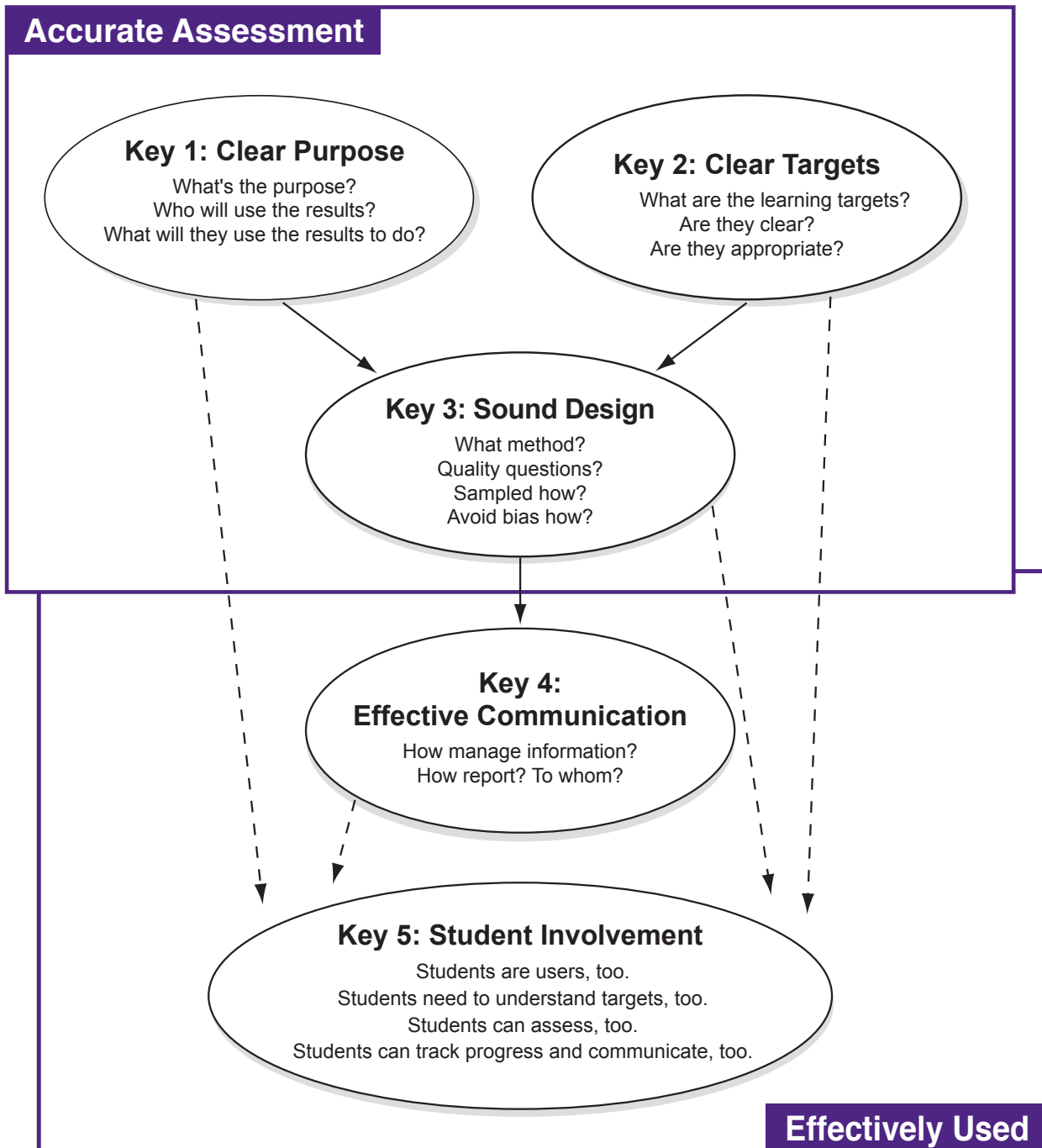
Vision Part 2: Accurate Assessment

Assessment users can make sound instructional decisions only if the data they rely on (the assessment results gathered) provide an accurate picture of the current level of student learning. Schools that go to the trouble to develop and administer more tests but then do not ensure the results will be accurate have the classic “garbage in, garbage out” situation. A faulty test results in faulty data, which, unfortunately, leads to faulty decisions about students. To ensure dependable results, teachers and school leaders need to learn how to develop and use assessments in ways that satisfy five key criteria for assessment quality (illustrated in Figure 2-1), each of which highlights a particular dimension of quality in the form of a continuum from weak to strong. Three criteria contribute to assessment accuracy, and two focus on their effective use. An initial overview follows.

Keys to Accuracy

Creating a quality assessment begins with clear answers to the questions, *Why* are we conducting this assessment? What is its purpose? How will the results be used? We

Figure 2-1 Keys to Quality Classroom Assessment



introduced this issue in the previous section. The developer must begin with a plan of who will use the results and how. What instructional decisions will be made? Without a sense of user(s) and use(s) of the assessment, the developer cannot infer what kind of information it must produce. How can one build an assessment to provide information without knowing what information is needed?

As discussed previously, teachers can use classroom assessment to support learning, as an instructional intervention (assessment *for* learning), or to verify learning, as in assigning grades, for example (assessment *of* learning). The challenge is to be clear from the beginning of assessment development which purpose is being served.

The second question addressed in assessment development is, *What* student achievement is to be assessed? Without clear targets—an established set of achievement expectations to be taught and learned—the author cannot properly focus test items or scoring procedures. The assessment must measure student achievement of the intended learning.

Once the assessment purpose is defined and learning target(s) identified, then *assessment design* can begin. The creation of a quality assessment for any particular context requires the following:

- Selection of a proper assessment method
- Development of quality items, exercises, and scoring guides
- Proper sampling of student achievement so as to draw a proper inference about student learning success
- Elimination of relevant sources of bias that can distort results

Keys to Effective Use

A good assessment will yield sound evidence of student learning. The next challenge is to get the results into the hands of the intended user(s) so they can inform instructional decisions. This requires *effective communication*. The characteristics of good communication will vary depending on the formative or summative purpose of the assessment. Regardless, the highest-quality assessment yielding the most accurate

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results is wasted if its results are miscommunicated. We share guidelines for effective communication later in this guide.

The second key to effective assessment use centers on *students as users of assessment results*. When students become involved in the assessment process during their learning and have the opportunity to watch themselves improve over time, their confidence, motivation, and achievement also improve. This is “assessment *for* learning,” and represents the third foundational concept to the development of a balanced local assessment system. Compelling evidence of the efficacy of assessment *for* learning is detailed in two comprehensive research reviews (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

Vision Part 3: Classroom Assessment *for* Student Learning

Black and Wiliam’s (1998) review of research on the impact of formative assessment reveals profound achievement gains attributable to the effective management of the day-to-day classroom assessment process. Effective management includes providing students with clear learning targets, descriptive feedback, and intentionally involving students in the entire assessment process, including self-assessment, goal-setting, monitoring, and communicating results.

When students become involved in the assessment process during their learning and have the opportunity to watch themselves improve over time, their confidence, motivation, and achievement also improve.

Sadler (1989) provides an orientation to this way of thinking about classroom assessment by contending that the teacher’s challenge is to help students understand (1) what good work looks like from the very beginning of the learning (know where I’m going), (2) how to compare their work to that standard of excellence such that the differences become clear to them (know where I am now), and (3) how to close the gap between them (know where and how to improve). Atkin, Black, & Coffey (2001) convert these understandings into three brief questions.

Chappuis (2009) blends these ideas into a series of seven assessment/instructional strategies that provide a useful framework for thinking about formative classroom assessment practices that involve students as active users of assessment information. Teachers must be provided with the opportunity to learn how to do the following (Chappuis, 2009, pp. 11–13):

Where Am I Going?

Strategy 1: Provide students with a clear and understandable vision of the learning target.

Strategy 2: Use examples and models of strong and weak work.

Where Am I Now?

Strategy 3: Offer regular descriptive feedback.

Strategy 4: Teach students to self-assess and set goals.

How Can I Close the Gap?

Strategy 5: Design lessons to focus on one learning target or aspect of quality at a time.

Strategy 6: Teach students focused revision.

Strategy 7: Engage students in self-reflection, and let them keep track of and share their learning.

Implicit in these seven strategies is an understanding of how important the student's role is as an assessment user, decision maker, and player in the entire assessment experience. In this paradigm students reflect on their own assessment results, interpreting their scores and grades to decide how to proceed, or if to proceed at all. If students decide to move on then the learning moves forward and the teachers/decision makers get to play their role on behalf of student success. But if learners decide that success is beyond reach then the others have no role to play and the learning stops.

The question is, What can teachers do to help students respond productively to every assessment? The answer is to consistently apply these strategies and principles of assessment *for* learning by helping students see where they are headed, where they are now, and how to close the gap. In doing so, teachers help students feel in control of the probability of their own success.

Assessment *for* Learning

Here's how it works: In an assessment *for* learning environment, students have continuous access to evidence of their own learning, and they collaborate with their teachers in understanding, based on the evidence, what comes next in that learning. Their success in moving forward turns on their emotional reaction to their assessment results. For successful learners, these issues tend to resolve themselves automatically and comfortably. Ongoing success spawns the actions needed to produce more success. But, for struggling learners, chronic failure can lead to a pattern of just giving up.

Historically, schools have served the mission of ranking students from the highest to the lowest achiever. The amount of time available to learn was fixed: one year per grade. The amount learned by the end of that time varied; some students learned a great deal, some very little. Able learners built on past success to grow rapidly. However, students who failed to master the early prerequisites within the allotted time also failed to learn what followed. In the schools of our youth, if we worked hard and learned a great deal, that was a positive result, as we would occupy places high in the rank order. And, if we gave up in the face of what we believed to be inevitable failure—that was an acceptable result for the institution too, because we would occupy places low in the rank order. The greater the spread of achievement from top to bottom, the more dependable the rank order.

The emotional dynamics of this process were clear and purposeful. From the very earliest grades, some students rode winning streaks to the top. Right from the start, they scored high on assessments and were assigned high grades. The emotional effect of this was that they came to see themselves as capable learners—they became increasingly confident in school. That gave them the emotional strength to risk striving for more success because in their minds success was within reach if they tried. Note that the trigger for the decisions they made about their own learning was *their interpretation of their own assessment results*.

But students who scored very low on tests right from the beginning were assigned correspondingly low grades. This caused them from the outset to doubt their own capabilities as learners. Their loss of confidence deprived them of the emotional reserves to continue to risk trying. Chronic failure was hard to hide and became embarrassing—it was better not to try. As their motivation waned, their achievement suffered. Notice again how the learners' own interpretation of assessment results influenced their confidence and willingness to strive on.

The important lesson educators must learn is that students' emotional reactions to any set of assessment results, whether high, midrange, or low, will determine what they think, feel, and do in response to those results.

The driving emotional forces of fear and intimidation triggered by the prospect of being held accountable now must be replaced by the driving emotions of optimism, engagement, and persistence triggered by the belief that “I am going to get this if I keep trying.” If all students are to succeed, they must have continuous access to credible evidence of their own academic *success* at mastering prescribed achievement standards. Again, the Black and Wiliam (1998), Sadler (1989), Atkin, Black, and Coffey (2001), and Chappuis (2009) suggestions and lessons apply directly.

Under a new mission of not leaving any child behind, the teacher's objectives should now include helping students develop a strong sense of control over their own aca-

ademic success. In terms of general psychology, Bandura (1994) refers to this sense as *self-efficacy*:

A strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in many ways. People with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. They set themselves challenging goals and maintain strong commitment to them. They heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills which are acquirable. They approach threatening situations with assurance that they can exercise control over them. Such an efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability. . . .

In contrast, people who doubt their capabilities shy away from difficult tasks which they view as personal threats. They have low aspirations and weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When faced with difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, on the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. They slacken their efforts and give up quickly in the face of difficulties. They are slow to recover their sense of efficacy following failure or setbacks. Because they view insufficient performance as deficient aptitude, it does not require much failure for them to lose faith in their capabilities. (p. 71)

In terms of classroom assessment competence, teachers can help students build a strong sense of academic self-efficacy by helping them understand what success looks like and then by showing them how to use information from each assessment to get closer and closer to the target. In these classrooms, assessments become far more than merely one-time events attached to the end of the teaching. They become part of the learning process by keeping students both posted on their progress and confident enough to continue striving. Later in this text we detail how to make sure this happens for all learners.

Summary of the Vision

The locus of control for the achievement of assessment balance and quality is the local school district, as this is the only level of the educational system at which assessment can serve valuable purposes at annual, interim/benchmark, and classroom levels. Neither federal nor state education agencies can use assessment to benefit student learning in all of the ways local schools can. This doesn't mean federal and state agencies can't contribute to and support local excellence in assessment. They can adopt policies that support assessment literacy and the use of classroom assessment

to support student learning. They can also help keep “high stakes” annual tests in perspective—by being clear about their value and limitations.

The five Keys to Assessment Quality (see Figure 2-1) are integral to effective local assessment systems. District and school leaders must understand the conditions that are essential for assessment to work well in any context: a clear purpose for the assessment, clear and appropriate learning targets, and accurate, sound assessment design and delivery.

It also is important for school leaders and teachers to understand the benefits of involving students in their own formative assessment. Students, as the ones who actually choose whether to strive or give up, need to understand the learning targets clearly and know exactly where they are in relation to mastering those targets.

The final component is effective communication of results; for all involved to understand the diverse information needs of assessment users at all levels: students and teachers at the classroom level, teachers and curriculum leaders at the interim/benchmark level, and school leaders at the annual testing level. Excellence in assessment is achieved when all user questions are answered with the right information delivered in a timely and understandable form using high-quality assessments.





Thinking About Assessment

Activity 1: Reflecting on the Vision of Excellence in Assessment

Purpose:

As leaders part of your task is to share the vision of excellence with others and invite them in to further shape that vision and make it become a reality. This activity will help you clarify the main elements of a balanced assessment program.

Time:

30 minutes

Materials Needed:

The vision as presented in this guide

Suggested Room Setup:

Tables and chairs set up for easy discussion among those present

Directions:

Each of you has read Part 2 of this book, “Building the Vision.” With your learning team members present, answer together the following questions so each member can share with others a vision for excellence in assessment.

1. Why is excellence in assessment necessary for improved student learning?
2. In the context of an integrated system that uses the assessment process and its results to both support and audit learning, what are the three active ingredients?
3. What does a balanced assessment system look like?
4. What are the five keys to assessment quality? Summarize each key in your own words.
5. Assessment *for* learning answers three questions students have when learning: Where am I going? Where am I now? How can I close the gap? Describe how Chappuis’s (2009) seven strategies help students answer these questions.



Thinking About Assessment

Activity 2: Building a Vision of a Quality, Balanced Assessment Program

Purpose:

Having a vision of a balanced assessment program is essential to starting the journey of incorporating quality assessment practices in every classroom in your school or district. When you can articulate that vision it is easier to invite others in to shape it and own it.

The activity has two parts. In Part 1 you will draft in your own words a vision of a balanced assessment program that later you can share with others. Part 2 illustrates high-quality assessment in action in the lives of real students, teachers, administrators, and policy makers. You will revisit your vision of excellence in assessment and reaffirm or rethink and revise it.

Later in this Action Guide we ask your team to compare your current assessment program status to this new vision and identify what you must adjust to make it a reality.

PART 1

Time:

2 ½ hour meeting

Materials Needed:

- Blank index cards
- Flipchart paper and markers, easels if available
- Table 2-1, “Framework for a Balanced Assessment System,” on pp. 14–15 of this Action Guide

Suggested Room Setup:

- Team members seated at tables of six to eight people
- Flipchart, easels if available, and markers for each table

Directions:

Table Discussion (30 minutes)

You have just read Part 2 of this book, “Building the Vision.” Working as table teams, using Table 2-1 as a template and based on your current understanding of important assessment issues and systemic change, outline your vision of a high-quality assessment system. Brainstorm and refine your team’s answers to the following two questions.

1. What do you want your assessment system to accomplish? What will be its key objectives?
2. How will your system accomplish these things? What will be its key components?

Use your flipchart paper to record your answers/ideas for shaping your preliminary vision (Figure 2-2). Post each team's ideas around the room.

Figure 2-2 **Building Your Vision: The “What” and “How” Table Discussion**

What do you want your assessment system to accomplish? What will be its key objectives?
How will you accomplish these things? What will be its key components?

First Gallery Walk (20 minutes):

Walk around and view the preliminary vision statements from the various tables. Note what you see as similarities and differences among the visions.

Return to your tables and share your findings. Decide as a team whether to revise your table's vision statement.

PART 2

Time:

40 minutes after reading and discussing Part 2 of this text

Materials Needed:

- “Emily’s Story,” found on pp. 32–39.
- Flipcharts from Part 1 of this activity containing each table’s vision of a balanced assessment system
- Sheets of multicolored sticky dots for each team’s table

Directions:

Read “Emily’s Story,” one student’s experience with assessment *for* learning and the impact it had on her confidence as a learner.

1. Reflect on the keys to success for Emily and her classmates. Focus on the student and teacher strategies that brought confidence and responsibility to Emily as a learner.
2. Make note of the conditions that needed to be in place for Emily and her classmates, Ms. Weathersby and her colleagues, school leaders, and the community to facilitate this success.
3. After reading “Emily’s Story,” engage in a team discussion centered around the following questions. We suggest that you read over these discussion questions before reading:
 - What strategies/activities were Emily and her classmates engaged in to bring success to them as learners?
 - What was Ms. W.’s role?
 - What was Emily’s emotional response to these assessment experiences in her learning?

Brainstorm lists of those necessary conditions for Emily’s success by answering the following questions:

- What conditions needed to be in place in Ms. W.'s classroom?
- What conditions needed to be in place in the English Department and the high school?
- What contribution did the district need to make for this success to happen?
- What contribution did the school board and community need to make?

As a leadership team, then, address the following questions:

- To what extent are these conditions satisfied in your classrooms, schools, district, and community?
- What might you need to change or add to your team's vision of assessment excellence as a result of reading this story? Make changes on your vision statements (flipchart paper).

Second Gallery Walk—A District Vision of a Quality, Balanced Assessment Program (30 minutes):

Again display your vision statements (flipchart paper) and as teams take a second gallery walk. Use the following process:

1. Take a sheet of colored dots from your table.
2. Go to each posted vision and place a dot next to an element/component that you believe must be addressed/included in the district vision statement for a quality, balanced assessment system.
3. Note what is common to the visions around the room.
4. Decide as a team whether elements that are not in common should be discussed in a large group, to consider if to include or exclude any of these elements and why.

Table Discussion (15 minutes) and Large-group Discussion (15 minutes):

Discuss your responses to process items 3 and 4 as a table and then as a large group. Come to a consensus on what components/elements your school or district vision for balanced assessment should have. Designate one person to keep a summary of the large-group discussion.

Select one representative from each table to take the dotted sheets and the large-group discussion summary and draft a common district vision of a quality, balanced assessment system. Return to the large group later in the day or on another day for final consensus on the elements and the wording. Note and discuss how this vision of assessment aligns with Table 2-1, “Framework for a Balanced Assessment System.” on pp. 14–15 of this guide.

As the group works through Part 3 of this Action Guide, on the Seven Actions to high-quality assessment, and begins to grapple with the leadership competencies presented in Part 4 you will want to revisit your vision statement. During this time it will be a dynamic document subject to revisions based on your deepening understanding of balanced assessment and the process necessary to make it a reality in every classroom.

A STORY OF CLASSROOM SUCCESS

Emily's Story

A Vision of Success

At a local school board meeting, the English faculty from the high school presents the results of their evaluation of the new writing instruction program that they had implemented over the past year. The audience includes a young woman named Emily, a junior at the local high school, sitting in the back of the room with her parents. She knows she will be a big part of the presentation. She's only a little nervous. She understands how important her role is. It has been quite a year for her, unlike any she has ever experienced in school before. She also knows her parents and teacher are as proud of her as she is of herself.

As part of their preparation for this program, the English faculty attended a summer institute on assessing writing proficiency and integrating such assessments into their teaching and their students' learning. The teachers were confident that this kind of professional development and their subsequent program revisions would produce much higher levels of writing proficiency.

As the first step in presenting program evaluation results, the English department chair, Ms. Weathersby, who also happens to be Emily's English teacher, distributes a sample of student writing to the board members (with the student's name removed), asking them to read and evaluate this writing. They do so, expressing their dismay aloud as they go. They are less than complimentary in their commentary on these samples of student work. One board member reports with some frustration that, if these represent the results of that new writing program, the new program clearly is not working. The board member is right. This is, in fact, a pretty weak piece of work. Emily's mom puts her arm around her daughter's shoulder and hugs her.

But Ms. Weathersby urges patience and asks the board members to be very specific in stating what they don't like about this work. As the board registers its complaints, a faculty member records the criticisms on chart paper for all to see. The list is long,

including everything from repetitiveness to disorganization to short, choppy sentences and disconnected ideas.

Next, Ms. Weathersby distributes another sample of student writing, asking the board to read and evaluate it. Ah, now this, they report, is more like it! This work is much better! But be specific, she demands. What do you like about this work? They list positive aspects: good choice of words, sound sentence structure, clever ideas, and so on. Emily is ready to burst! She squeezes her mom's hand.

The reason she's so full of pride at this moment is that this has been a special year for her and her classmates. For the first time ever, they became partners with their English teachers in managing their own improvement as writers. Early in the year, Ms. Weathersby ("Ms. W.," they all call her) made it crystal clear to Emily that she was, in fact, not a very good writer and that just trying hard to get better was not going to be enough. She expected Emily to improve—nothing else would suffice.

Ms. W. started the year by working with students to implement new state writing standards, including understanding quality performance in word choice, sentence structure, organization, and voice, and by sharing some new "analytical scoring guides" written just for students. Each scoring guide explained the differences between good and poor-quality writing in understandable terms. When Emily and her teacher evaluated her first two pieces of writing using these standards, she received very low ratings. Not very good. . . .

But she also began to study samples of writing Ms. W. provided that Emily could see were very good. Slowly, she began to understand why they were good. The differences between these and her work started to become clear. Ms. W. began to share examples and strategies that would help her writing improve one step at a time. As she practiced and time passed, Emily and her classmates kept samples of their old writing to compare to their new writing, and they began to build portfolios. Thus, she literally began to watch her own writing skills improve before her very eyes. At midyear, her parents were invited in for a conference at which Emily, not Ms. Weathersby, shared the contents of her portfolio and discussed her emerging writing skills. Emily remembers sharing thoughts about some aspects of her writing that had become very strong and some examples of things she still needed to work on. Now, the year was at an end and here she sat waiting for her turn to speak to the school board about all of this. What a year!

Now, having set the board up by having them analyze, evaluate, and compare these two samples of student work, Ms. W. springs a surprise. The two pieces of writing they had just evaluated, one of relatively poor quality and one of outstanding quality, were produced by the same writer at the beginning and at the end of the school year! This, she reports, is evidence of the kind of impact the new writing program is having on student writing proficiency.

Needless to say, all are impressed. However, one board member wonders aloud, “Have all your students improved in this way?” Having anticipated the question, the rest of the English faculty joins the presentation and produces carefully prepared charts depicting dramatic changes in typical student performance over time on rating scales for each of six clearly articulated dimensions of good writing. They accompany their description of student performance on each scale with actual samples of student work illustrating various levels of proficiency.

Further, Ms. W. informs the board that the student whose improvement has been so dramatically illustrated with the work they have just analyzed is present at this school board meeting, along with her parents. This student is ready to talk with the board about the nature of her learning experience. Emily, you’re on!

Interest among the board members runs high. Emily talks about how she has come to understand the truly important differences between good and bad writing. She refers to differences she had not understood before, how she has learned to assess her own writing and to fix it when it doesn’t “work well,” and how she and her classmates have learned to talk with her teacher and each other about what it means to write well. Ms. W. talks about the improved focus of writing instruction, increase in student motivation, and important positive changes in the very nature of the student–teacher relationship.

A board member asks Emily if she likes to write, and she answers, “I do now!” This board member turns to Emily’s parents and asks their impression of all of this. They report with pride that they had never seen so much evidence before of Emily’s achievement and most of it came from Emily herself. Emily had never been called on to lead the parent-teacher conference before. They had no idea she was so articulate. They loved it. Their daughter’s pride in and accountability for her achievement has skyrocketed in the past year.

As the meeting ends, it is clear to all in attendance that evening that this application of student-involved classroom assessment had contributed to important learning. The English faculty accepted responsibility for student learning, shared that responsibility with their students, and everybody won. There are good feelings all around. One of the accountability demands of the community was satisfied with the presentation of credible evidence of student success, and the new writing program was the reason for improved student achievement. Obviously, this story has a happy ending.

Success from the Student’s Point of View

The day after the board meeting, I interviewed Emily about the evening’s events. As you read, think about how our conversation centers on what really works for Emily.

“You did a nice job at the school board meeting last night, Emily,” I started.

“Thanks,” she replied. “What’s most exciting for me is that, last year, I could never have done it.”

“What’s changed from last year?”

“I guess I’m more confident. I knew what had happened for me in English class and I wanted to tell them my story.”

“You became a confident writer.”

“Yeah, but that’s not what I mean. Last night at the board meeting I was more than a good writer. I felt good talking about my writing and how I’d improved. It’s like, I understand what had happened to me and I have a way to describe it.”

“Let’s talk about Emily the confident writer. What were you thinking last night when the board members were reacting to your initial writing sample—you know, the one that wasn’t very good? Still confident?”

“Mom helped. She squeezed my hand and I remember she whispered in my ear, “You’ll show ’em!” That helped me handle it. It’s funny, I was listening to their comments to see if they knew anything about good writing. I wondered if they understood as much about it as I do—like, maybe they needed to take Ms. Weathersby’s class.”

“How did they do?” I asked, laughing.

“Pretty well, actually,” Em replied. “They found some problems in my early work and described them pretty well. When I first started last fall, I wouldn’t have been able to do that. I was a terrible writer.”

“How do you know that, Em?”

“Now I understand where I was then, how little I could do. No organization. I didn’t even know my own voice. No one had ever taken the time to show me the secrets. I’d never learned to analyze my writing. I wouldn’t have known what to look for or how to describe it or how to change it. That’s part of what Ms. W. taught us.”

“How did she do that?”

“To begin with, she taught us to do what the board members did last night: analyze other people’s writing. We looked at newspaper editorials, passages from books we were reading, letters friends had sent us. She wanted us to see what made those pieces work or not work. She would read a piece to us and then we’d brainstorm what made it good or bad. Pretty soon, we began to see patterns—things that worked or didn’t work. She wanted us to begin to see and hear stuff as she read out loud.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Well, look, here’s my early piece from the meeting last night. See, just read it!”

(Please read the Beginning of the Year Sample in Figure 2-3.)

Figure 2-3 **Beginning of the Year Writing Sample**

Computers are a thing of the future. They help us in thousands of ways. Computers are a help to our lives. They make things easier. They help us to keep track of information.

Computers are simple to use. Anyone can learn how. You do not have to be a computer expert to operate a computer. You just need to know a few basic things.

Computers can be robots that will change our lives. Robots are really computers! Robots do a lot of the work that humans used to do. This makes our lives much easier. Robots build cars and do many other tasks that humans used to do. When robots learn to do more, they will take over most of our work. This will free humans to do other kinds of things. You can also communicate on computers. It is much faster than mail! You can look up information, too. You can find information on anything at all on a computer.

Computers are changing the work and changing the way we work and communicate. In many ways, computers are changing our lives and making our lives better and easier.

Source: Personal writing by Nikki Spandel. Reprinted by permission.

“See, there are no grammar or usage mistakes. So it’s ‘correct’ in that sense. But these short, choppy sentences just don’t work. And it doesn’t say anything or go anywhere. It’s just a bunch of disconnected thoughts. It doesn’t grab you and hold your attention. Then it just stops. It just ends. Now look at my second piece to see the difference.”

(Please read the End of the Year Sample in Figure 2-4.)

Figure 2-4 End of the Year Writing Sample

So there I was, my face aglow with the reflection on my computer screen, trying to come up with the next line for my essay. Writing it was akin to Chinese water torture, as I could never seem to end it. It dragged on and on, a never-ending babble of stuff.

Suddenly, unexpectedly—I felt an ending coming on. I could wrap this thing up in four or five sentences, and this dreadful assignment would be over. I'd be free.

I had not saved yet, and decided I would do so now. I clasped the slick, white mouse in my hand, slid it over the mouse pad, and watched as the black arrow progressed toward the "File" menu. By accident, I clicked the mouse button just to the left of paragraph 66. I saw a flash and the next thing I knew, I was back to square one. I stared at the blank screen for a moment in disbelief. Where was my essay? My ten-billion-page masterpiece? Gone?! No—that couldn't be! Not after all the work I had done! Would a computer be that unforgiving? That unfeeling? Didn't it care about me at all?

I decided not to give up hope just yet. The secret was to remain calm. After all, my file had to be somewhere—right? That's what all the manuals say—"It's in there somewhere." I went back to the "File" menu, much more carefully this time. First, I tried a friendly sounding category called "Find File." No luck there; I hadn't given the file a name.

Ah, then I had a brainstorm. I could simply go up to "Undo." Yes, that would be my savior! A simple click of a button and my problem would be solved! I went to Undo, but it looked a bit fuzzy. Not a good sign. That means there is nothing to undo. Don't panic ... don't panic ...

I decided to try to exit the program, not really knowing what I would accomplish by this but feeling more than a little desperate. Next, I clicked on the icon that would allow me back in to word processing. A small sign appeared, telling me that my program was being used by another user. Another user? What's it talking about? I'm the only user, you idiot! Or at least I'm trying to be a user! Give me my paper back! Right now!

I clicked on the icon again and again—to no avail. Click ... click ... clickclickclickCLICKCLICKCLICK!!!! Without warning, a thin cloud of smoke began to rise from the back of the computer. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Sighing, I opened my desk drawer, and pulled out a tablet and pen. It was going to be a long day.

Source: Personal writing by Nikki Spandel. Reprinted by permission.

“In this one, I tried to tell about the feelings of frustration that happen when humans use machines. See, I think the voice in this piece comes from the feeling that ‘We’ve all been there.’ Everyone who works with computers has had this experience. A writer’s tiny problem (not being able to find a good ending) turns into a major problem (losing the whole document). This idea makes the piece clear and organized. I think the reader can picture this poor, frustrated writer at her computer, wanting, trying to communicate in a human way—but finding that the computer is just as frustrated with her!”

“You sound just like you did last night at the board meeting.”

“I’m always like this about my writing now. I know what works. Sentences are important. So is voice. So are organization and word choice—all that stuff. If you do it right, it works and you know it,” she replied with a smile.

“What kinds of things did Ms. W. do in class that worked for you?”

“Well, like, when we were first getting started, Ms. Weathersby gave us a big stack of student papers she’d collected over the years—some good, some bad, and everything in between. Our assignment was to sort them into four stacks based on quality, from real good to real bad. When we were done, we compared who put what papers in which piles and then we talked about why. Sometimes, the discussions got pretty heated! Ms. W. wanted us to describe what we thought were the differences among the piles. Over time, we formed those differences into a set of rating scales that we used to analyze, evaluate, and improve our writing.”

“Did you evaluate your own work or each other’s?”

“Only our own to begin with. Ms. W. said she didn’t want anyone being embarrassed. We all had a lot to learn. It was supposed to be private until we began to trust our own judgments. She kept saying, ‘Trust me. You’ll get better at this and then you can share.’”

“Did you ever move on to evaluating each other’s work?”

“Yeah. After a while, we began to trust ourselves and each other. Then we were free to ask classmates for opinions. But Ms. W. said, no blanket judgments—no saying just, this is good or bad. And we were always supposed to be honest. If we couldn’t see how to help someone improve a piece, we were supposed to say so.”

“Were you able to see improvement in your writing along the way?” I wondered.

“Yeah, see, Ms. W. said that was the whole idea. I’ve still got my writing portfolio full of practice, see? It starts out pretty bad back in the fall and slowly gets pretty good toward spring. This is where the two pieces came from that the board read last night. I picked them. I talk about the changes in my writing in the self-reflections in here. My portfolio tells the whole story. Want to look through it?”

“I sure do. What do you think Ms. Weathersby did that was right, Emily?”

“Nobody had ever been so clear with me before about what it took to be really good at school stuff. It’s like, there’s no mystery—no need to psych her out. She said, ‘I won’t ever surprise you, trust me. I’ll show you what I want and I don’t want any excuses. But you’ve got to deliver good writing in this class. You don’t deliver, you don’t succeed.’

“Every so often, she would give us something she had written, so we could rate and provide her with feedback on her work. She listened to our comments and said it really helped her improve her writing. All of a sudden, we became her teachers! That was so cool!

“You know, she was the first teacher ever to tell me that it was okay not to be very good at something at first, like, when you’re trying to do something new. But we couldn’t stay there. We had to get a little better each time. If we didn’t, it was our own fault. She didn’t want us to give up on ourselves. If we kept improving, over time, we could learn to write well. I wish every teacher would do that. She would say, ‘There’s no shortage of success around here. You learn to write well, you get an A. My goal is to have everyone learn to write well and deserve an A.’”

“Thanks for filling in the details, Em.”

“Thank you for asking!”

